

Romantic Love and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT Westerners generally understand romantic love as a compelling emotional attraction to an idealized other. The Western notion of romantic love is spreading worldwide, while simultaneously theorists argue that romance is losing its authority due to the conditions of post-modernity. This paper seeks to move the discussion of love toward a more comparative and historical level, and argues that romantic love is neither universal, nor a uniquely Western institution. Rather, it is best understood as a form of the sacred, which appears in various forms under certain specific social conditions. It can blossom or fade, but the impulse behind it is not likely to vanish. The paper provides a short history of the study of romantic love in Western social thought and then goes on to present a structural analysis of romantic love in several cultures and epochs.

Introduction

Does romantic love exist elsewhere? If so, what forms does it take and how can it be understood? These may seem strange questions, since if there is anything that modern Westerners take for granted, it is the importance – even the necessity – of falling in love. The songs, movies, and stories of our shared culture endlessly describe variations in the pain and ecstasy of love as it is found, challenged, lost, denied or thwarted, only to flare up again, carrying all before it, or else destroying the lovers in a conflagration of desire (Carey 1969). According to the romantic clichés, love is blind, love overwhelms, a life without love is not worth living, marriage should be for love alone, and anything less is worthless and a sham. Romantic love cannot be bought and sold, love cannot be calculated, it is mysterious, true and deep, spontaneous and compelling, it can strike anyone – even the most hardened cynic can be laid low by Cupid. For lovers love provides ‘a kind of secular salvation ... that could redeem their entire existence, even though they might die of it’ (Illouz 1998:176). As the philosopher Roberto Unger has remarked, this ideal is ‘the most influential mode of moral vision in our culture’ (Unger 1984:29). Powerful images of romance relentlessly invade, motivate and animate our ordinary lives – not only for those of us who are in hot pursuit of the dream of love but also for those of us who think love is a sham.

So potent is the romantic ideal that it has steadily gained more and more currency internationally. Cross-cultural studies show that young people from Pakistan to China, from Polynesia to Malawi, nowadays are likely to say they no longer want their marriages to be arranged; instead they hope for a passionate romantic affair that will

* I want to thank Nicole Hayes for her insights on this topic. I hope her present research on romantic love in Africa will do much to help answer some of the questions asked in this paper.

sweep them off their feet and eventually unite them with an ideal beloved in an idyllic marriage of soul mates.¹ Of course, this new mode of desire may be nothing more than the appropriation of a commercialized idealization of sexuality promoted by the ubiquitous mass media, movies, books and advertisements spewed forth by globally dominant Western cultural machine.² From this perspective, perhaps the worldwide evolution of a culture of romantic love is a commodified illusion; true romantic love is really only a Western experience.

But perhaps that too is an illusion. In fact, many influential social scientists have argued that romantic love, even in the West, is nothing but a thin disguise for lust that has been sold to a gullible public. This was the view famously taken by Ralph Linton, the pioneering American anthropologist, who wrote:

The hero of the modern American movie is always a romantic lover, just as the hero of an old Arab epic is always an epileptic. A cynic may suspect that in any ordinary population the percentage of individuals with capacity for romantic love of the Hollywood type was about as large as that of persons able to throw genuine epileptic fits. However, given a little social encouragement, either one can be adequately imitated without the performer admitting even to himself that the performance is not genuine (Linton 1936:175).

Or, as Robert Lowie put it: 'practical points of view are foremost in inaugurating and maintaining the conjugal state. They eclipse romance not only among aborigines, but virtually everywhere except in small circles of Western society'. Even in these circles, he remarks, romance is nothing more than 'a fiction' (Lowie 1948:220; 1931:95).

According to several contemporary studies, the fiction of romance has increasingly become less and less convincing to Westerners as a result of its implication in commerce and in response to the increasing individualism, equality and autonomy in the postmodern social world. As Illouz writes, today 'romance in real life has become an empty form, acutely conscious of itself as code or cliché' (Illouz 1997:293). And Anthony Giddens has argued that in modern circumstances, the quest for undying romantic love is being rapidly displaced by a series of confluent relationships each 'entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens 1992:58). Terminated without regret or guilt when no longer satisfying, such affairs are valued only insofar as they are 'comfortable'. Gone is the passion and idealization of romance; they have been replaced by placid 'pure relationships' consisting of the pleasurable reciprocal exchange of fluids and feelings. For Giddens, this is a positive development that will lead to 'recognizing the other as an independent being, who can be loved for her or his specific traits and qualities; and it also offers the chance of release from an obsessive involvement with a broken or dying relationship' (Giddens 1992:93). So, according to these authors, precisely as romance is becoming a universal idiom for intimacy, it is simultaneously under threat, and likely to disappear. And a good thing that would be, according to Giddens.

However, when we look at how 'pure relationships' are enacted across cultures, we find they are likely to reflect and express brutal inequities in influence and wealth,

without any of the softening effects of romantic idealism. In such cases, sexual exchange can become simple exploitation, hidden beneath a veneer of free choice. For example, consider Hawa, the African bar girl (*ashawo*), whose adventurous transnational sexual life has been documented by John Chernoff. While her *joie de vivre* and ability to adapt to adverse circumstances is admirable, the truth is that she lives in a world where a single woman's survival often requires submitting to the sadistic sexual fantasies of the rich and powerful; Hawa's life, devoid of illusion, is also devoid of options and almost devoid of hope. As she says, 'There is not any girl who will wake up as a young girl and say, "As for me, when I grow up I want to be an *ashawo*"' (Chernoff 2003:203).

Perhaps, then, romantic idealization ought not be summarily dismissed as a delusion propagated by the movies and propelled by commerce. Instead, I am going to argue that it is more complex, and more interesting: it is a form of the sacred that is neither universal, nor unique to the West, but instead is characteristic of certain kinds of social formations, (for earlier versions of my analysis, see Lindholm 1998a, 1998b, 1995, and 1988). If this is so, then romantic love may not be so easily done away with; and if it is on the wane, then its disappearance will not be without consequences. But before I make my argument, I first want to consider in more detail some of the ways in which romantic love has been conceptualized by anthropology.

Love among the anthropologists

Until very recently, anthropology has had almost nothing to say about how romantic love has been imagined, sought, or experienced, either in the West or in other cultures. Instead, ethnographers have been far more comfortable writing about cannibalism and incest than writing about romance. Until recently, the lack of any professional anthropological interest in romantic love was probably a product of a vain disciplinary hope to be recognized as objective scientists of culture. To achieve this aim, research on 'soft' and 'feminine' topics like love, or even emotion, was discouraged in favor of the investigation of more quantifiable aspects of power, social organization, and so on. This became especially characteristic in the 1950s and 60s during the controversy over the culture and personality school of anthropology in the United States, which was discredited due to its over-emphasis on the importance of early childhood training (tellingly derided as diaperology) and its use of untrustworthy personality tests for the discovery of the emotions characteristic of other cultures. In the wake of this debacle, the study of emotional life was left to clinical psychologists, who formulated pencil and paper tests that turned the analysis of personal emotional states into a matter of statistics (Lindholm 2001).

However, with the 'Geertzian turn' toward the anthropological interpretation of cultural meaning systems, the study of emotion began to flourish once again, outside the discredited framework of the culture and personality paradigm. Rather, interest moved away from childhood socialization and the manner in which universal emotions were culturally selected and expressed and toward regarding emotion as 'embodied cognition' motivating actors within a coherent and enclosed symbolic system

(Rosaldo 1984; Lutz 1988). Even so, romantic love remained understudied as research on depression, anger and other dysfunctional feelings became a thriving subfield in anthropology as well as in the psychological and medical community.

Why have negative emotions, such as depression and anger, attracted so much academic attention, while research on romantic love has had so little? Perhaps a contrast and comparison can help to reveal some of the hidden causes of this apparent anomaly, and can set the stage for a more serious debate about the anthropology of love.

The first thing to note is that the study of dysfunctional emotional states is supposed to have a practical application. Analysis, it is thought, will lead to a therapeutic understanding and perhaps a return to normality. Love too has often been spoken of in the metaphorical language of insanity. People in love are 'love-sick,' lovers are 'crazy for each other,' and are expected to be out of touch with ordinary reality, prone to delusions and to heightened states of exaltation and anxiety.³ Traditionally, the social scientists and marriage counselors who have written about love have taken the illness metaphor quite seriously, portraying romantic entanglement as an unhealthy escape from reality in fantasies that must be discarded in order to enter the desirable adult stage of settled and reasonable companionate marriage.⁴

The imagery of romance as a kind of madness would be quite familiar to classical Greeks and Romans, and to people in pre-modern Japan, India and China as well, who saw romantic attachment as a dangerous affliction (I'll discuss the reasons for this later). The residual salience of this historical metaphor in the modern West may help explain the wariness with which the study of love has been approached by social scientists. For if romantic love is understood implicitly to be a mental disorder, it is unique in being a kind of derangement that, according to our belief system, is ardently to be desired. Following the logic of the connection between love and disease, we can see that if falling in love and depression are both regarded as kinds of insanity, and if rational analysis is regarded as therapy for mental disease, then trying to explain and thereby cure depression or rage makes sense, while explaining romance clearly does not. An underlying (and probably unconscious) assumption is that the use of rational reason is likely to destroy irrational feeling. In other words, studying love can cause its absence, and so should be avoided.

Whether this conjecture is accurate or not, certainly scholarly reluctance to study love is connected to the way romantic love has been imagined to be a transcendent experience that, by its very nature, resists any rational analysis. Francesco Alberoni has categorized this opposition in terms of the tension between charismatic experiences of ecstatic illumination (which he calls nascent states) and institutions.

Since the nascent state is the truth of the institution – falling in love is the truth of love – it sees the institution as devoid of truth, as pure power. And since the institution cannot see its own truth in the nascent state – which is precarious, fleeting, pure becoming – it sees that state as irrationality, madness, scandal (Alberoni 1983:87).

From Alberoni's perspective, it appears that intellectuals writing from within the authority of academic institutional boundaries cannot recognize or convey the actual

experience of love, while those living within the nascent state of 'love-worlds' cannot translate their reality into the institutional language of the academy. The premises of each of these conditions are reckoned to be mutually contradictory.

This radical incommensurability is evident in the two epistemes generally used in ordinary discourse about falling in love. Among lovers and the general public the poetic mode represents love as elevating and sublime, a moral good in itself. In subversive opposition to this paradigm is the joking pornographic mode, which comically unmasks the poetic lover as a sexual predator. But despite their differences, these discourses are alike in that they both remove love from the realm of rational discussion. Poetry renders love ineffable; pornography reduces it to the obscene and ridiculous. As a result, any interpretive ethnographic study of love may well appear to be removing the poetry from the experience, while at the same time engaging in a bit of keyhole peeking under the guise of research. Both make the investigator into an absurd figure. And absurdity is one thing that anthropology, which is already nervous of its status as a real social science, can ill afford.

On the other side of the divide are the hard scientists – psychologists and sociologists – without disciplinary anxiety who trained to cultivate detachment and to administer replicable tests and surveys. Following their taken-for-granted orientation toward quantification and objectivity, they have ignored the problem of conveying the experience of love and have spoken in a utilitarian and causal professional language which portrays romantic idealization as a means toward a desired end, usually sexual congress, but also the exchange of goods, the maximization of one's gene pool, and so on. From their point of view, the poetic and transcendent quality of love is an illusion that disguises the fundamental goal; the scientists in this instance seem to be on the side of the pornographers, though without any of their subversive humor.⁵

I will discuss some of the implications of the scientific perspective shortly, but for the moment I simply want to reiterate that a quantitative and calculative rationalistic approach does not do justice to the way love is understood and talked about by lovers themselves. As a result, scholars wanting to study romantic love are stuck between trying to speak the common language of love, which is either poetic (to those immersed in the nascent state of 'being in love') or pornographic (to skeptics), or else in the cool and detached discourse of experimental science, which is incongruously inconsistent with what the lover's heart feels.

Calling attention to the striking problem of achieving an adequate discourse for addressing the topic of love is important because it directs our attention to the crucial and complex place that romantic love occupies in Western thought. Awareness of the knot of epistemic contradictions obscuring, distorting, transforming or denying the experience of romance ought not to frighten us away from the topic, but rather should spark an interest in the serious study of romantic love. At the same time, what emerges from even the perfunctory outline I have attempted here is that the study of romance ought to be undertaken with a humbling sense of the inadequacy of our language and the limits of our understanding. So, with that caveat in mind, let me not so modestly outline some of the directions taken in the study of romantic love by anthropologists and their allies, providing some illustrations along the way.

Paradigms for love: sexual and sacred

As I have already mentioned, it is very often assumed by Western social scientists and philosophers that the Western ideal of romantic love serves primarily as a socially acceptable reason to engage in sexual intercourse. A famous example occurs in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, where the philosopher scathingly imagines the bad faith of a young girl absently permitting her hand to be stroked by a suitor while she simultaneously imagines herself admired solely as a creature of purity and abstract intellect (Sartre 1956). From Sartre's point of view, people who say they are 'in love' are fooling themselves, disguising their simple human lust under a mask of idealization; other cultures, not burdened by Christian morality, would supposedly not need such self-delusions, and so would not develop romantic ideals (for examples, see Hunt 1959; Endelman 1989). Historians and sociologists have tended to make similar assumptions, though their approaches have been somewhat different. Romantic love, the standard argument goes, was a direct response to the rise of capitalism, and served as a counterweight to the atomism that resulted from the breakup of traditional communal forms of social life. For example, Howard Gadlin writes that:

Intimate relationships, as we understand them today, emerged during the early decades of the nineteenth century...with the self-conscious bourgeois individual whose life is torn between the separated worlds of work and home. Individualism and intimacy are the Siamese twins of modernization (Gadlin 1977:34; the classic statements of this perspective are in Parsons 1949, 1951; see also Shorter 1977; Stone 1988).

According to this theory, isolated modern men and women, alienated by their participation in an impersonal marketplace, sought solace and meaning in the arms of an idealized lover. Love provided what the newly industrialized society had taken away: a feeling of belonging and significance. Without capitalism, then, there would be no love.⁶

However, of late these views of romantic love as uniquely modern and Western have been challenged from two different directions. The first is from anthropological research that focuses on the contextual study of emotion, including the emotion of romantic attraction. The second, derived from sociobiology, envisions romance as an evolutionary mechanism that stimulates long-term sexual attraction and binds naturally polygamous men and naturally monogamous women together in the stable families required to propagate the human species (Fischer 1992. For other arguments, see Jankowiak 1995; de Munck 1998). Though each revalues romance, the claims made by these two new modes are in opposition. Anthropological students of emotion are interested in discovering when and where romantic love occurs, and in correlating its emergence with particular social and psychological preconditions (Goode 1959). For them, romantic love is culturally constructed, though it may be based on some more fundamental human impulses. Those most influenced by sociobiology, in contrast, believe romantic love must necessarily appear in all human societies, and search for it beneath the welter of cultural variation.

My own sympathies are with the former position. I believe that the sociobiologi-

cal affirmation of the ubiquity of romantic love is unproven, and that the connection between love and sex is problematic (as I will demonstrate below). I also believe that Western civilization did not discover love. Other people, in other cultures, both now and in the past, have also known the bittersweet pleasure and anguish of romance; the job of ethnography is to discover these cultures and outline the circumstances and trajectories of love in them. For example, a great body of literary evidence clearly demonstrates that the ideology and practice of romantic love was well developed, at least among the elite, in many pre-modern non-Western complex societies, such as Japan, China, India, and the Middle East, as well as among our own cultural ancestors in ancient Greece, Rome and elsewhere. Based on his study of this material, Yehudi Cohen goes so far as to argue 'romantic love in general, is an adaptation to pressures of life in a state society' (Cohen 1969:666). In all of these cases there are remarkable similarities to our own modern experience of love, as well as some striking differences, which help to illuminate the relationship between love and social structure.

The most obvious and surprising difference is that in every one of these cultures love and marriage were at odds with one another. As Seneca wrote: 'To love one's wife with an ardent passion is to commit adultery' (quoted in Grimal 1986:252). In fact, in most of the complex societies for which we have records of romantic passion, conjugal love between husband and wife was considered both absurd and impossible. The reason for this seeming paradox becomes evident if we make a comparative analysis of the social organizations of these societies. In each case, the most important aspect of personal identity was membership in one's father's clan. These patrilineal ties provided the political and economic affiliations that were crucial for survival and status. Only through membership in a patrilineage could men make claims to property, or assert leadership; women relied on their patrilineage for protection and honor. But lineages did not exist in isolation; they were tied to other lineages through the exchange of women – that is, through marriage. Such alliances were vital to building the strength of a clan or family.

In this context matrimony was too important a matter to be decided by young people swept away by passion. Rather, marriage arrangements were negotiated by powerful elders whose job was to advance the interests of the clan – much as royal marriages are still arranged today. The new wife entered her husband's extended family as a stranger, under the thumb of her in-laws. Usually, her life was confined to the home, where she could only gain status by bearing children; meanwhile, her husband was likely to avoid the women's quarters altogether, competing with other men for honor and renown in the public sphere. In these societies, men and women alike viewed marriage as a duty and a necessity; romantic attraction was not a part of the bargain. Affection between husband and wife was generally frowned upon as an indication of potential disloyalty to the larger extended family.

While love with one's spouse was next to impossible, romantic feelings (when they existed) were directed toward individuals one could not marry. This preserved the businesslike atmosphere of the family, but could sometimes have disastrous consequences. In Tokugawa Japan, for example, love dramas always revolved around the conflicts caused by relationships between respectable men and their courtesans. When

these relationships drew men away from their duties and toward disgrace, the only answer was suicide. Similarly, in imperial Rome, patrician men sometimes found themselves falling deeply in love with the slaves they met in brothels. This love was a release from the oppressive obligations and rivalries found in arranged marriages and in the intrigues of public life. Roman poets idealized their beloved slave prostitutes as *domina*, literally reversing the role of master and slave. The problem was that nobleman smitten with a prostitute were likely to become obsessively anxious about her loyalty, since it was to her great advantage to convince her clients of her sincerity. One noble lover bitterly named the woman who held him in sexual thrall 'Nemesis' – the sister of tenderness and deceit (quoted in Grimal 1986:164).

In other societies the dangers of sexual servitude were avoided by expediently guaranteeing the chastity of romantic relationships. The best-known examples are the Medieval Troubadours, who, in a transformation of the cult of the Virgin Mary, renounced physical contact with the women they worshipped. Modern commentators, who assume that love and sexual desire must be united, have been quick to see the hypocrisy in this ideal, and certainly some bards were not as innocent as they pretended to be. But the assumption that a chaste ideology must be a disguise for sexual desire is assuming what needs to be proven. In fact, the modern Western notion of sex as an absolute good – summed up by Woody Allen's comment that an orgasm is the only thing on earth that's good even when it's bad – is actually quite unusual across cultures. In South Asia, for instance, men dread the debility they believe to be caused by semen loss, while in China excessive sexual activity is said to make the penis withdraw into the body, with potentially fatal results. In many other societies sexual intercourse is regarded as polluting, repellant and risky, and is surrounded by multiple taboos and restrictions.

A deep fear of sexuality often correlates with a social configuration where chastity is inordinately valued, as among the Dugum Dani of New Guinea, who practice almost complete sexual abstinence (Heider 1970). In fact, in Melanesia the sexual act is generally something to be avoided except under the most extraordinary circumstances. For instance, in Manus, as reported by Margaret Mead, sexual intercourse is regarded as a disgusting, perilous and shameful business. In contrast:

Illicit love affairs, affairs of choice, are, significantly enough, described as situations in which people need not have sex if they do not wish to, but can simply sit and talk and laugh together.... The wonderful thing about lovers is that you don't have to sleep with them (Mead 1956: 361, 405).

If this all seems too foreign, we can recall that in our own recent past, proper public Victorian middle-class morality portrayed sexual desire as a degrading intrusion on reason, to be resisted and controlled by men, and denied completely by women. Private accounts of Victorian private lives show that these efforts, while sometimes a struggle, were usually not in vain. For many, sexuality was indeed subdued – at least between husbands and wives. With this in mind, we should not be so skeptical of the courtier's claim that he saw his lady as a creature of sanctified innocence and virtue. For these courtiers, and for their idealized beloveds, sex might be appropriate in the

household as a wifely duty and male prerogative or (for men) when paid for in brothels – but not between true lovers, whose love was pure.

Chaste love among the Marri Baluch

A culturally valued division between true love and sexuality is characteristic of many cultures. For an extended example, let me turn to the Marri Baluch, a nomadic people living in the marginal deserts of Iran, who were described in a classic work by Robert Pehrson (1966). According to Pehrson, the Marri inhabit a harsh, isolated and unforgiving world. They are highly individualistic, self-interested and competitive, and expect opportunism and manipulation from all social transactions. Their personal lives are dominated by fear, mistrust, and hostility; secrecy and social masking are at a premium, while collective action and cooperation are minimal. Yet among these people, as Pehrson writes, romantic relationships are idealized, and a love affair 'is a thing of surpassing beauty and value', implying absolute trust, mutuality, and loyalty; such a love is to be pursued at all costs (Pehrson 1966:65). Romance is both the stuff of dreams, and of life. Frustrated lovers among the Marri may commit suicide, and become celebrated in the romantic poems and songs that are the mainstay of Marri art. As one Marri woman tells Pehrson 'it is very great, very hard, to be a lover for us Marri' (Pehrson 1966:62).

Unlike Western love relationships, romance among the Marri stands absolutely opposed to marriage, which is never for love. It is, in fact, shameful even to show affection for one's spouse. True romance has to be secret, and with a married woman of a distant camp. This is a dangerous matter, since other camps are hostile, and meeting with unguarded women is punishable by death. The striking contrast to the West is a consequence of the social organization of the Marri, who live in small patrilineal, patrilocal campsites ruled lightly by a religiously sanctioned central authority, called the Sardar.

Although political domination does occur, the local units, permeable and shifting as they are, nonetheless have considerable solidity and autonomy, judging their own disputes and controlling their own relations of production within a framework of traditional knowledge and local consent. The patrilineal patrilocal ideology means that members of the campsite have absolute rights and duties to one another that are legitimated by close blood ties and co-residence. Participation in blood feuds, payment of fines, rights to pasturage and the punishment of adultery all are incumbent on the minimal lineage group.

However, this minimal group is not one of cooperation and friendship. The camp members, despite their ties, work separately, have their own tents and property, cooperate as little as possible, and are mutually suspicious and antagonistic. If they could, they would separate, but the need for defense and a varied labor pool keeps the camps together; the rights and duties of kinship legitimize this pragmatic unity. Within this inimical but constraining structure, Marri men continually manipulate to gain power and status. By attracting a loyal following among his cohorts, the poor herdsman can make a claim for becoming the local factotum of the Sardar, thereby gaining points

over one's nearest, and most hostile, lineage mates and rivals.⁷ Marriage in this context is not a matter of personal choice and attraction. Instead, Marri men use marriage in an instrumental fashion to establish relationships that will help them to pursue their political interests; women are treated as chattel, to be controlled and dominated for the honor and benefit of the patriarch.

For the Marri, romantic involvement, with all its risk, is one of the few human relationships that are felt to be of value in and for itself, and not as a means to the instrumental ends of personal power and prestige. It is understood to be opposed to marriage in every way. Marriage is a public and sanctioned relationship between superior men and inferior women, often within the camp and the lineage, and always among allies; it is preeminently politically motivated, and it is expected to be cold and hostile at best. Romance on the contrary is secretive, private, and conducted with strangers who are potential enemies. Its only possible political consequences are disastrous enmity and feud. Romantic love has the potential for dividing groups while it unites the lovers; marriage aims to solidify groups, while permitting no attraction within the asymmetrical couple. In marriage, the woman is inferior and despised, while in romance she is honored and revered.

As in other similarly organized societies, the Marri claim that a true romantic relationship, in contrast to marriage, is not sexual. Theoretically, at least, the male lover worships his beloved as a pure being and is worshipped in return; forgoing the connotations of female inferiority and degradation that the Marri (like many patrilineal peoples) believe to be implicit in the sexual act, the romantic couple lose themselves in mutual gazes, spontaneous recitations of poetry and the reciprocal exchange of confidences and love tokens. Whether or not Marri love affairs are actually chaste, what is important is that this is the cultural ideal of romantic love the Marri believe in and aspire to.

For the Marri, then, romance is with a distant and untouchable other, and it is consciously perceived as negating the rivalries of power, the inferiority of women, and the constraints of the marriage tie. In theory, it is chaste and highly idealized. This romantic complex occurs within a relatively rigidly structured, but characteristically competitive social formation. Far from providing the basis for reproducing the dominant social order, romance in this instance opposes it in every way. This same oppositional pattern can be found throughout the Middle East, where true lovers must never consummate their passion, and where love is only discussed in the language of poetry, not in ordinary discourse (Abu-Lughod 1990). In this culture, only a love that remains on the level of profound spiritual yearning is worthy of retelling.

As I mentioned, research indicates that the separation between sexual desire and romantic love is especially common in societies where sexual intercourse is regarded as an act of violence and domination, or where sexuality is associated with pollution and spiritual danger. Such societies may also have elaborate notions of the complementarity of love relations that reverse the actual sexual asymmetry of male-female relations. Thus the degraded slave prostitute in imperial Rome becomes the *domina* while the downtrodden Marri wife (who, in the words of one Marri woman, is only fit to 'eat shit') is worshipped as a goddess by her lover (Pehrson 1966:59).

Even in our own society, romantic idealization may severely impede sexual desire which, according to some studies, is far more likely to be aroused by images of deg-

radation and rape than by images of tenderness and affection. We decry the polarization between an idealized virgin and a degraded whore, and try to unite the two by seeking to have sex with the one we adore. But it is evident that in other societies idealization and sexual desire are conceptually and actually separated. Perhaps, then, our demand that love and sex go together is no more 'natural' or universal than our equally culture-bound requirement that love should lead to marriage.

What do we talk about when we talk about love?⁸

We do not know with any degree of certainty why people are drawn to one another with a fervor so compulsive and so overwhelming that it can end in suicide; scholars still debate whether romantic idealization is a human universal, and what sorts of social conditions favor – or disfavor – expressions of love. At this point, we can say that cross-cultural surveys do indicate that in some areas (most spectacularly in sub-Saharan Africa) idealized romantic love rarely has any part in the indigenous cultural repertoire.⁹ But this may only be because these regions were studied by anthropologists who had little interest in emotional life. Because of the paucity of data, it is impossible to know with certainty which societies do *not* have an elaborated belief in romantic love. However, from the ethnographic record, it appears that such beliefs may be quite rare. For example, an ethnographic cross-cultural survey which I undertook some years ago uncovered only 21 unequivocal examples of romantic idealization out of 248 cases: five were in Oceania (Murngin, !Kung, Tikopia, Tonga, Trobriands), three in Africa (Ashanti, Hottentot, Ife), five in Asia (the Marri Baluch, Ainu, Gond, Miao, Semang), five in North America (Blackfoot, Commanche, Crow, Ojibwa, Western Apache) and three in South America (Mataco, Ona, Yahgan).¹⁰ In contrast, another survey by Jankowiak and Fischer which used the same data, but which defined romantic love primarily as a matter of intense sexual attraction produced a much larger number of examples, leading the researchers to conclude that romantic love is most likely a human universal, though its manifestations are greatly effected by culture (Jankowiak and Fischer 1992). Clearly, how investigators characterize love will make a vast difference in the number of societies where they find it.

Despite disparities in findings due to divergences in definition, all recent research does admit that romantic love varies according to cultural constraints. Looking at the matter structurally, it seems plausible that relatively stable societies with solidified extended families, age-sets, and other encompassing social networks that offer alternative forms of belonging and experiences of participation in-group rituals are less prone to romantic involvement. It is also evident that people in many cultures do experience powerful emotions that we can recognize as kindred to our own sense of falling in love; just as clearly, those emotions can lead in different directions and have different implications for them than they do for us. In any case, social scientists can no longer pretend that love exists only as a modern delusion, unworthy of serious study.

What then are the possibilities for developing an anthropology of romantic love? There are many avenues to follow, but the path I have taken is structural and comparative. I have asked where and under what circumstances are 'romantic love com-

plexes' found? Once the existence of such complexes is established, then we can begin to postulate what social factors promote and which extinguish the possibility of love. I have argued herein and elsewhere that one characteristic type of romantic idealization appears in societies sharing the relatively rigid and antagonistic social organization found among the Marri Baluch as well as in complex 'courtly' societies, such as ancient Rome and Tokugawa Japan. Under the conditions of strong social constraint, well-formed primordial identities, and intense rivalry for power found both in centralized stratified societies and in certain kinds of highly structured and internally competitive simpler social formations, the idealization offered by romantic love offers a way of imagining a different and more fulfilling life. But because of the objective reality of the social environment, romance can never form the base for actually constructing the family, as it has in contemporary Western society. It must instead stand against and outside of the central social formation, and will in consequence be fantastic and unrealistic in its imagery and dangerous in its enactment, unlike love in the flexible, egalitarian and atomistic cultures of the modern world.

In contrast, societies with extremely fluid social relations marked by mobility and competition, operating according to individualistic worldviews within harsh or otherwise insecure environments may find meaning and emotional warmth in the mutuality of romantic relationships. Romance in these societies is associated with marriage, since the couple is idealized as the ultimate refuge against the hostile world, and functions as the necessary nucleus of the atomized social organization. Societies fitting this description are an odd lot: they include most of the modern developed world, as well as the simplest hunting and gathering groups.

There is, finally, another very different type of social formation, which seems to favor romantic love, though its outlines are less clear. These societies are neither centralized nor rigid, nor are they atomistic, or under any extreme social or ecological pressure. Rather, they are group-oriented, non-individualistic cultures that strictly control marriage, but that offer compensation to their youth by means of institutionalized premarital sexual freedom, usually within a age-graded clubhouse; sexual relations inside the clubhouse are destined to be ephemeral, since marriage is only with outsiders, but these early sexual experiences often lead to powerful romantic attachments and idealizations, and even to love suicide. Examples of this type are found in tribal India, Southeast Asia and in the Oceanic cultures where romantic love has been documented.

However, although I believe my structurally oriented comparative analysis is logically coherent and credible, the data supporting it is relatively weak. As I have noted, we know very little so far about romantic love cross-culturally, or even in the West, due to the long-standing reluctance of anthropologists to address and document the emotional experiences of persons, and to take account of the trajectories of love, both in story and in life. Is romance actually wholly intertwined with sexuality, as socio-biologists argue, or, as I have claimed, is it a form of the sacred, to be disentangled from sexuality and traced to its source as one way of transcending the existential limits of the self? Or is it something else?

In any case, romantic love is not to be confused with or reduced to its commercial expressions, though these are powerful indeed and worth studying. Rather, commodification is an attempt, quite successful, to cash in on deep human desires. A conse-

quence, well-documented by Illouz, is the intrusion of calculation and cynicism into the ideal – both of which stand at right angles to idealization, and so render love suspect (Illouz 1997). This is what makes it possible for Giddens to argue that romantic love is likely to vanish in favor of utilitarian pure relationships where idealization is replaced by calculation. Sociobiologists would say that this is impossible because of a human genetic predisposition for idealization. A more anthropological-psychological approach, which I favor, affirms that romance can indeed fade, but the hope for something other than the daily routine and the practical pleasures cannot, and will instead find expression through some other compelling imaginary of the sacred – perhaps in charismatic collectives, perhaps in other, as yet unknown forms.

I believe that when we discuss ‘what we talk about when we talk about love’ we need to remember that human beings always want to exceed their concrete lives and be more than rational maximizers of valued cultural goals. The existential desire to escape the limits of the given is the source of the human yearning for the sacred. Romantic love is one modern form that this yearning takes, offering the experience of salvation in this world, even if only sporadically and in fantasy; as the realization of an impulse to transcendence it exists in tension with reality and with other forms of existential commitment; it may also suffer from internal contradictions due to various interpretations of how love should be enacted (for examples see Quinn 1987; Trawick 1990). However, that is only my opinion. So far, real answers to what we talk about when we talk about love are yet to be substantially grounded in ethnography. But anthropologists who combine rigor with sympathetic insight may be able to do justice to the complexity, passion and pain of love, while also revealing its cultural limits, its particular expressions, and its historical precedents. That is what I hope from this collection of essays.

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Notes

- ¹ For a counter-example, see Lipset 2004.
- ² The reality is likely to be much more complex. For example, in contemporary Trinidad American soap operas have encouraged Trinidadian women to expect romantic rhetoric and behavior from their suitors. As a result, sexual practices have changed, generally to the benefit of women (Birth and Freilich 1995). For another example of the power of media images of love to transform intimate relationships, see Verheijen’s essay in this issue.
- ³ Freud (1959) specifically pairs romantic love with depression. Both involve subjective senses of being overwhelmed and of self-loss. Classically, depression comes as a result of failure in love, while love is salvation from depression.
- ⁴ The distinction between ‘falling in love’ and ‘being in love’ is pervasive in Western sociological and psychological literature on the family, with the latter praised and the former devalued as ‘adolescent’. In Weberian terms, the equivalent would be the distinction between charisma and bureaucracy.
- ⁵ Schopenhauer was perhaps the first modern philosopher to make this argument. For him,

romantic love was necessary to persuade rational individuals to accept the onerous responsibilities of raising children – something they would never do if not bemused by romantic delusions of bliss. As he writes, ‘if Petrarch’s passion had been satisfied, his song would have been silenced from that moment, just as is that of the bird, as soon as the eggs are laid’ (1966:557).

- ⁶ This claim is much disputed by MacFarlane (1986, 1987) who argues that romantic love arose in Medieval Northern Europe coincidentally with the relative autonomy and fluidity of the social system. For him, capitalism is a product, not a precursor, of a society where romantic love predominates.
- ⁷ The potential for minimal social movement is of crucial importance, not the degree of movement possible. An absolutely rigid structure would not evolve the love complex noted here because social pressure would be absent.
- ⁸ This phrase is taken from Carver (1981).
- ⁹ The usual source of data for these surveys is the Human Relations Area File (HRAF), a compendium of data on approximately 350 human societies which have been extensively studied by anthropologists. This data is sorted according to numbered topics, which allows for rapid creation of comparative data sets. The HRAF is a non-profit consortium that is housed at Yale University, but is widely available on-line.
- ¹⁰ The actual research was done in 1985-6 by two Harvard undergraduates (Andrew Buckser and Susan Rofman) who utilized the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), focusing especially on small-scale societies and on the categories ‘basis of marriage’ (581), ‘suicide’ (762), and ‘ideas about sex’ (831). The ‘basis of marriage’ category was chosen because cultures with romantic love often link love and marriage. But, as I have noted, this is hardly universal, so I tried to measure the intensity of the romantic love ideology in the culture through the category of ‘suicide’. Since romantic love, by definition, means that life without the beloved is not worth living, my reasoning was that suicide, stemming from rejection, grief at a lover’s death, or frustrated marriage plans would be a good indicator of romantic idealization. Excluded here were suicides from hurt pride or as revenge. The final category, ‘ideas about sex’, yielded love stories and myths, which I assumed revealed underlying beliefs about idealized relationships. In completing their ratings, the researchers worked independently, scoring cases according to the degree that romantic love appeared to exist in a particular society as ideal and as action. After comparing their findings, a final list of societies where romantic love seemed to exist was then made up. For a fuller account, see Lindholm (1998b). As a side note, the two researchers are now happily married. I do not have enough data to say whether this outcome has any correlation with their research.

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